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SUBJECT: CONSENSUS ON ELECTION AND RECONCILIATION BEGINS
OVER DINNER

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Classified By: Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker

11. (C) Summary. The visit of elections expert Andrew Raucci provided a rare opportunity for a frank dinner discussion between senior representatives from most of Pakistan's key political parties: PML, PPP, PML-N/ARD, MQM and ANP. Raucci's comment about the critical need for credibility in the elections process sparked a vigorous debate and a significant level of consensus from a group normally accustomed to taking potshots at one another. The group moved closer to agreement on the need for free and fair elections, a level playing ground for all parties, a credible Election Commissioner and election process, a joint code of conduct, and tamping down political victimization. Yet, the fact that the leaders of three of five of the parties represented at the table are currently in exile (voluntarily or involuntarily) and that all five leaders have spent at least six months in jail for political reasons demonstrates the harsh zero-sum nature of Pakistani politics. It also hints at just how difficult it will be for the parties to implement the consensus reached at the table. End Summary.

Budgets and Balochistan Spawn the Party Line

12. (SBU) A June 19 dinner hosted by Ambassador Crocker in honor of the visit of Illinois-based elections expert Andrew Raucci (part of a Public Affairs speaker series timed to coincide with the launch of US assistance for Pakistani elections) brought together senior party leaders Chaudhary Shujaat Hussain of the Pakistan Muslim League (PML), Iqbal Jhagra from the Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy (ARD) and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), Raja Pervaiz Ashraf from the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), Asfandiyar Wali Khan from the Awami National Party (ANP), and Farooq Sattar from the MQM. Party representatives--ordinarily accustomed to grandstanding during public meetings--used this rare private opportunity to discuss a range of policy issues.

13. (SBU) The evening's discussions began with banter on

the ongoing budget and quickly gave way to a heated discussion of provincial autonomy and Balochistan. In particular, the ANP and MQM representatives expressed consternation that although two Senate Subcommittees met on Balochistan last year, none of the recommendations had been implemented. Chaudhary Shujaat--who has taken personal responsibility to negotiate with Baloch nationalists for the Government--indicated that the recommendations of the first Subcommittee addressing political reform to resolve the current Baloch crisis were being implemented. (Note: Post has yet to see any concrete steps towards implementation, despite GOP assurances. End note). Shujaat noted that Subcommittee on Constitutional Affairs, which was responsible for making legal (and constitutional) changes to allow for greater provincial autonomy, had stalled. Shujaat seemed open to Asfandayar Wali's suggestions that Shujaat personally intervene in re-starting the committee.

But, Talk of Elections Brings Consensus...

14. (SBU) Elections speaker Raucci began a lively dialogue on the upcoming election process (and problems with past elections) by noting that what was most needed in Pakistan's electoral process is credibility. PML-N's Iqbal Jhagra quickly chimed in that it was hard to have credibility in the process without a level playing field for all parties. Raja Pervaiz Ashraf noted that PPP's biggest concern was that there be a neutral caretaker government chosen by national consensus; that, and a level playing field would ensure credibility. Asfandayar Wali at first balked at the idea that the Election Commission would be neutral--or credible--but conceded that if the ruling party took steps to prove their will to have fair elections, it was possible.

5.(C) One of the more heated discussions of the evening was

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over the selection process for the new Election Commissioner. When the opposition said they wished the process had been more transparent, Shujaat sparked off a debate by claiming that he had solicited the advice of the "leader of the opposition." (Note: A reference to MMA leader Fazl-ur Rehman, whose designation as "leader of the opposition" was in itself a subject of contentious debate. End note.) Asfandayar, Sattar, Ashraf, and Jhagra balked at the fact that they had not been looped in; Shujaat retorted that he had tried, but he could only do so much if the leader of the opposition chose not to share the information. (Note: Embassy PolOffs have been told by PPP, JI and JUI-F that their participation had been solicited and that they had suggested names, but that PPP would publicly deny this. End note). Overall, Chaudhary Shujaat--the target of much of the opposition's ire at the government's purported misdeeds--listened carefully to all of the complaints and suggestions and managed to convince listeners that he too, was genuinely concerned and interested in having a credible, fair elections process.

16. (SBU) One of the most poignant moments in the two-hour discussion was that political victimization was almost a universal "norm" in Pakistan. To make this point to Dr. Raucci, the Ambassador asked for a "show of hands" by anyone at the table who had been jailed for political reasons: all of the participants indicated that they had spent at least 6 months in jail, with some sacrificing up to 5-7 years of their lives in the name of political struggle. This point --and the very open dialogue of the evening--eventually gave way to a near-consensus on several baseline criteria for credible elections in Pakistan: a free and fair process, a level playing ground for all parties, an Election Commission deemed credible, a joint code of conduct, and the need to avoid political victimization of their opposition in the future.

Comment

17. (C) The evening's debates highlighted once again for the

Mission the value of USG efforts to help the Election Commission and GOP-at-large build public confidence in the electoral process. It also demonstrated that the political parties appear ready for a new era in politics; the 2007-2008 election process will all but cement how that era turns out.

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